

Stephan Freißmann

## Fictions of Cognition

Representing (Un)Consciousness and Cognitive Science  
in Contemporary English and American Fiction

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

ELCH

Studies in English Literary and Cultural History

ELK

Studien zur Englischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft

Band 49

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 Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

**Freißmann, Stephan:** Fictions of Cognition:  
Representing (Un)Consciousness and Cognitive Science  
in Contemporary English and American Fiction /  
Stephan Freißmann.-  
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011  
(ELCH ; Band 49)  
ISBN 978-3-86821-336-2

Dissertation, Universität Gießen, 2009  
FB 05: Sprache, Literatur, Kultur

Umschlaggestaltung: Brigitta Disseldorf

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ISBN 978-3-86821-336-2

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WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier  
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier  
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier  
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: (0651) 41504  
Internet: <http://www.wvttrier.de>  
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## PREFACE

Many people have contributed to the genesis and completion of this study, which is a revised version of my PhD dissertation. First of all, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning for encouraging me to pursue my research interest in the interaction between cognitive science and literature and for providing the impulses necessary to forge this research interest into a PhD project. Doing research at the International PhD Programme (IPP) “Literary and Cultural Studies” and at the “International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture” (GCSC), both located at the University of Giessen, provided me with rich scholarly input as well as with an excellent research infrastructure. I am also grateful to him and his wife, Prof. Dr. Vera Nünning, as well as to Erwin Otto of the Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (WVT) for publishing this study in the ELCH series.

My gratitude also goes to Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Hallet who, together with Prof. Dr. Ansgar Nünning, spent much time and energy chairing the PhD colloquia at the University of Giessen, providing crucial input for the formation of the present study. Moreover, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Ralf Schneider of the University of Bielefeld for agreeing to act as a second reader of my dissertation. He provided valuable and clear-sighted criticism, much to the profit of this study. My thanks are also due to the other members of the committee of my dissertation defence, Prof. Dr. Uwe Wirth and Prof. Dr. Cora Dietl, who went out of their way to make an early date of the defence possible.

The members of my ‘class’ at the International PhD Programme – Ursula Arning, Hanna Bingel, Stefanie Bock, Simon Cooke, René Dietrich, Melina Gehring, Meike Hölscher, Anett Löscher, Kirsten Pohl, Eleonora Ravizza, Heide Reinhäckel, Alessandra Riva and Ronja Tripp – provided many impulses that contributed much to the progress of my work. I thank Sonja Altnöder, Ronja Tripp, René Dietrich, Simon Cooke, Martin Zierold, Ann van de Veire, as well as all the other coordinators and staff at the IPP and GCSC for finding simple solutions to complicated problems. My gratitude is equally due to Alan Palmer and David Herman for encouragement during my research, to Robert Vogt and Birgit Neumann for sharing their narratological expertise, to Melina Gehring for providing detailed feedback to parts of this study, to Dorothee Birke for answering many questions, and to Frederick Berg for keeping a watchful eye on my English.

The German National Academic Foundation (*Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*) has funded my research by awarding a three-year PhD-scholarship, for which I am very grateful. I equally thank my parents who have constantly supported this project and the publication of this study. Last but not least my family – my wife Diana as well as our sons Jonas and David – have borne with me during the more and the less joyful times of working on this study. Their acceptance and support mean everything to me.



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## I. INTRODUCTION: COGNITIVE SCIENCE VERSUS NARRATIVE FICTION?

*ZEIT*: Is the notion of being free only an illusionary construct?

*SINGER*: I would deem it a *cultural* construction. Concerning its influence on our behaviour, it is as real as belief or value systems. But it is incompatible with what we have learned about the functioning of our brains. Nevertheless, the notion of being free rests on processes in the brain. Consequently, it must have developed during cultural evolution.

*WINGERT*: But freedom is not a mere notion! It is also a state in which I find myself able to say: That was me! I am doing this! That is, I can accept a behaviour, which an observer causally relates to myself as an organism, as my action, namely because it happens on the account of motives that I acknowledge as my – bad or good – motives, not just because of causes that lie within myself.<sup>1</sup>

(Assheuer/Schnabel 2000: 43; transl. SF; emphasis orig.)

This passage, taken from a debate between the neurophysiologist Wolf Singer and the philosopher Lutz Wingert which was published in the influential German weekly *Die Zeit* in December 2000 under the title “Who interprets the world?”,<sup>2</sup> confronts one representative from the sciences with one from the humanities. The double interview setting makes them discuss and, indeed, argue with each other, a kind of communication between scientists and ‘traditional culture’ the disappearance of which C.P. Snow deplored in his famous lecture on the Two Cultures (1998 [1959]: 2, 11). This epigraph neatly opposes a scientific and a philosophical view on human freedom of will. Is it only a cultural construction, as the scientist asserts? Or does it really exist, as the philosopher stresses? The debate over free will is a contested topic in Germany as well as in the Anglo-American realm.<sup>3</sup> The classic piece of research that prompted scientists

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<sup>1</sup> The original quotation reads: “*Zeit*: Ist die Vorstellung, frei zu sein, also nur ein illusionäres Konstrukt? – *Singer*: Ich halte sie für eine *kulturelle* Konstruktion. Sie ist, was ihren Einfluss auf unser Verhalten anlangt, ebenso real wie Glaubens- und Wertesysteme. Aber sie ist inkompatibel mit dem, was wir über die Funktion unserer Gehirne gelernt haben. Und dennoch beruht die Vorstellung, frei zu sein, auf Vorgängen im Gehirn. Sie muss sich also irgendwann im Laufe der Evolution ausgebildet haben. – *Wingert*: Freiheit ist doch nicht bloß eine Vorstellung! Sie ist auch ein Zustand, in dem ich mich als fähig erfahre, zu sagen: Das war ich! Das tue ich! Das heißt, ich kann dann ein Verhalten, das ein Beobachter mir als Organismus kausal zuordnet, auch als mein Handeln anerkennen; und zwar deshalb, weil es aus Gründen erfolgt, die ich als meine – schlechten oder guten – Gründe erkenne, und nicht bloß aus Ursachen, die in mir liegen.” (Assheuer/Schnabel 2000: 43; emphasis orig.)

<sup>2</sup> The original title of the article reads: “Wer deutet die Welt?” The debate was reprinted in Singer (2003).

<sup>3</sup> For sources that illustrate the popular importance of the topic in the Anglo-American world see the newspaper articles by Goldberg (2002), Horgan (2002) and Honigmann (2006). Roskies (2006), to whom I owe knowledge of these newspaper articles, discusses

to relativise the notion of human freedom of will are experiments conducted by Benjamin Libet (1985, 2004). He asked subjects to fixate a fast-rotating clock and indicate its position when they consciously decided to perform a motor act. At the same time, he measured subjects' brain activity, finding that brain cells had already initiated the conscious action before subjects became aware of it. The conclusion was that unconscious brain activity precedes conscious awareness, which suggested to some that freedom of will is merely an illusion, an imagination that is produced after the event.<sup>4</sup> Are human beings, then, completely determined by their nature – the laws of which can be understood by science – or is there freedom of will that allows human beings to act in an independent and, thus, culturally meaningful way?<sup>5</sup>

The challenge to human freedom of will posed by some thinkers in cognitive science concerns a basic element of the occidental idea of humankind that also underlies fiction. Great parts of the suspense in literary fiction results from the fact that characters are forced to make moral choices or take decisions. Without freedom of will these choices or decisions would be meaningless, making human agency an instance of biological determinacy. A similar challenge to another basic characteristic of humanity that is at the heart of fiction was diagnosed by the journalist John Cornwell in 1994 in a review of recent books on cognitive science:

No human phenomenon has so resisted scientific explanation as the idea of the self, traditionally known as the soul; human higher-order self-consciousness, that unique inner observation point from which we view the world. [...] Two recent books, Daniel C. Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* ([...] 1991) and Francis Crick's *The Astonishing Hypothesis* [(1994)...] exemplify a trend in popular exposition towards a self-confident denial of traditional ideas of personhood. (1994: 795)

What Cornwell calls 'traditional ideas of personhood' is, similarly to human freedom of will, one of the bases upon which Western fiction rests. It was, in fact, Cornwell's discussion of the two books mentioned in the quotation above that inspired in David Lodge the sense of a "challenge to the humanist or Enlightenment idea of man on which the presentation of character in the novel is based." (2002: 2)<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the same Daniel Dennett, whose theory is understood by Lodge as one element of a radical challenge to a foundation of Western fiction, uses a passage from an earlier novel by

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neuroscientific challenges to freedom of will from a philosophical standpoint. For another account of this debate in the German context see Roth/Grün (2006), an edited volume that saw its third edition in 2009. Schwarke (2007) scrutinises the debate about human freedom of will in terms of a conflict between the Two Cultures.

<sup>4</sup> Libet himself was careful to point out that his "findings should [...] be taken not as being antagonistic to free will but rather as affecting the view of how free will might operate." (1985: 538)

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the contributions to the collective volume *Human Nature: Fact and Fiction* (Wells/McFadden 2006), that combines contributions by scientists and fiction writers.

<sup>6</sup> This challenge later became the subject matter of Lodge's novel *Thinks...*, analysed in chapter III.2 of this study.